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# Beyond Relationism? Different Relational Perspectives and George Herbert Mead

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In recent years, there has been renewed interest among contemporary social theorists in the work of George Herbert Mead, and more recent interpretations have on occasion diverged significantly from more traditional views of Mead's work (see Joas 1995; Joas, Huebner eds. 2016). The pages that follow will be reflecting on Mead's work from the specific viewpoint of the relational theories of society that emerged in the period from the 1980s to the early 2020s. The reflections contained in this chapter essentially center around two questions: the first question is whether or not Mead can be considered as having offered added value to the formulation and development of contemporary relational sociologies; the second question is whether relational sociologies constitute a helpful, original interpretative key to certain controversial aspects of Mead's work, with particular reference to the relationship between the Self, social relations and the creativity of action.

## 1. G.H. MEAD AND THE "RELATIONAL TURN" IN SOCIOLOGY

Over the last thirty years or so, relational sociologies have developed significantly at the international level. The term "relational sociologies" is deliberately used in the plural form here, since "relational sociology" comprises a number of different research approaches, and these approaches are not always mutually compatible (Dépelteau 2018). Palgrave MacMillan's publication of two collective volumes (Dépelteau, Powell eds. 2013a; 2013b), together with the *Handbook of Relational Sociology* (Dépelteau ed. 2018), brought to the fore of international sociology the presence of a wealth of studies on relational issues. For many years beforehand there had been networks of scholars studying such questions in many parts of the world. Regardless of the differences among relational sociology's diverse research programs, it cannot be denied that what was being witnessed here was a "relational turn" in the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular. Did the reinterpretation of Mead's work play a specific role in the emergence and development of this "relational turn" in the social sciences? Was Mead an important source of inspiration for relational sociology scholars similarly to other classical thinkers, like for example Georg Simmel? Cantò Milá (2005) published a key study of the relational interpretation of Simmel's work, and has continued to analyze this question further in more recent writings (Cantò Milá 2018; 2020); other sociologists writing after Milá have tried to reinterpret Simmel from a relational perspective and/or establish a relational sociology based on key categories to be found in Simmel's thought: could a similar thing be deemed to have occurred in regard to Mead?

The question of Mead's role should be considered within the context of the broader debate on the originality of relational theories. Certain scholars operating in this field maintain that a relational theory originates from the hybridisation and updating of approaches and models previously established by classical sociologists and re-elaborated by contemporary sociological theory. Other scholars, on the other hand, argue that a relational theory of society is innovative and relatively independent of classical theories. Generally speaking, any new field of study and research inevitably has to seek legitimation within the scientific community. On the one hand, its dialogue with the classics, even when of a critical nature, helps legitimize that field's academic status: the sociological literature produced by the predecessors of relational theory may point to interrupted directions or contain food for thought which may be further developed within a contemporary context; the link with the classics thus legitimizes the development of a relational theory capable of interpreting those processes ongoing within contemporary society. On the other hand, it is also possible to legitimize the new field of study by claiming its substantial discontinuity from previous literature: a relational theory is justified by the very fact that classical sociological models fail to suitably comprehend existing social relations. This chapter intends to examine whether, and in what way, these two different perceptions of the role of relational sociology also influence the manner in which Mead's work may be reinterpreted.

A reflection on Mead that takes account of relational sociology should begin from certain key aspects of Mead's theory. When he investigates the process by which individual identity is established, he acknowledges the central role that social relations play in that process: a social relation exists when two or more individuals interact, and in that interaction each of them bears in mind the actions and behavior of the other(s). Mead points out that mutual interaction occurs through a process of symbolic mediation: individuals utilize symbols not only to interpret reality, but also to communicate with others, to share meanings, and to understand the meanings that others attribute to objects, actions and social relations. It is through symbolic communication and mediation in social interactions that the "definition of the situation" is gradually achieved. Mead distinguishes three phases in the formation of personal identity. During the initial phase, an individual gets to grips with language, and learns to utilize symbols and to communicate with others. During the second phase, the individual comes to terms with him/herself as seen through the eyes of others (at this point, Mead implicitly adopts the concept of the *Looking-Glass Self* as formulated by C.H. Cooley), and thus establishes an idea of him/herself, which Mead calls *Me*, through the expectations, judgements and definitions of others; during this phase, social relations (offering both information and feedback) represent the principal means by which the individual develops his/her identity. The third phase sees the individual developing a sense of *Self* (which Mead calls *I*) as an active person capable also of modifying the *Me* together with the social environment. During this phase of the process, an individual can rely on the linguistic, communicative and symbolic skills acquired during the preceding two phases, and may utilize such skills in a more reflexive, intentional manner in relations with others: "we then consider American pragmatism, specifically, what the work of George Herbert Mead might

offer to thinking about the Self as inherently relational and with a capacity for agentic reflexivity” (Roseneil, Kekotiki 2016, 144).

As previously mentioned, one of the key concepts of Mead’s theory is that of “symbolic mediation”. In order to interact with the social world around them, individuals create and employ symbols; it is in these processes of interaction that shared meanings are constructed, divulged and negotiated. Such symbols may be of a material nature, such as written words or physical objects, or they may consist of gestures. In both cases, the symbols in questions are a mental representation of something, and they enable individuals to communicate and cooperate with others. Symbols have a conventional meaning that is established through their social use and interaction, and this means that they can be used in a flexible, and also partly creative, cooperative manner. Signs also refer to something else; however, in this case, unlike with symbols, their meaning is of an intrinsic nature. Symbolic mediation enables individuals to develop thoughts, to act in a coordinated way, and to make decisions. Symbols are therefore of fundamental importance for the construction of social reality: in Mead’s view, that reality cannot be interpreted as a given, but is something that is constructed through the symbolic interaction of individuals. The question is whether this interweaving of symbolic relations and constructions presupposes individuals trapped in a social setting, or individuals capable of acting in a creative manner. This latter interpretation is the one proposed by Joas (1996) who, through the mediation of Dewey and Mead, revealed that it was possible to overcome the limitations of traditional social action theories.

While, on the one hand, Mead’s work can be justifiably considered a source of inspiration for those studying the processes of the construction of personal identity through social relations, on the other hand, as has been observed, “we cannot be too gung-ho about taking Mead as being uncomplicatedly compatible with contemporary relational sociology, the standard line taken is that Mead’s work describes the interactional mechanisms through which seemingly individual capacities and dispositions are socially engendered” (Abbot 2019, 21). The following pages will be considering a number of relational sociology studies and analyzing whether Mead had a key role to play in the formulation thereof; they will also be reflecting on how the authors examined here interpret Mead in regard to the question of the independence and creativity of the Self in relation to the social environment.

The starting point for such reflection is represented by two paradigmatic works: the *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* (Emirbayer 1997), which proved of fundamental importance for the international development of the “relational turn” in sociology, and the chapter of the *Handbook* dedicated to Mead, written by Côté (2018). Emirbayer’s *Manifesto* continues to be frequently mentioned, and for several years the arguments set out in that essay were considered to be a paradigmatic exposition of relational sociology, despite the fact that various (not in English though) studies have already been published in the field (Donati 1983; Bajoit 1992). In his *Manifesto* Emirbayer argues that there are two alternative ways of perceiving social reality: the first (rather static) approach perceives that reality as composed of substances, while the second, more dynamic approach sees it as a series of processes. Emirbayer argues that the majority of sociological theories are premised on the first of these two hypotheses: this is true, albeit to different degrees, of the models centered around the

rational actor, of those based on shared values and rules, of other forms of holism and structuralism, and even for statistical and quantitative approaches. Relational sociology, on the contrary, adopts the second of the two approaches, and tries to establish a vision of the relationship between individuals and social structures based on a transactional point of view. Emirbayer's essay clearly reveals the influence of American pragmatism (and of Dewey in particular) at the philosophical level, and of Harrison White at the sociological level. As far as Mead is concerned, on the other hand, he is only ever mentioned in a few sections of Emirbayer's work. Nevertheless, the latter points to Mead (together with Peirce) as among those who inspired transactional thinking in the field of sociology, which was also developed in Wiley's reflections (1994) on *The Semiotic Self*: "Norbert Wiley argues against both old and new versions of faculty psychology, which posits pregiven, innate properties in human nature, in favor of a more 'dialogic' perspective influenced by C. S. Peirce and George Herbert Mead. For him, the Self is a structure consisting of three elements, the I, you, and me, in continual interaction with each other and with other selves in an ongoing 'semiotic flow' of meaning. From Wiley's (1994, 72) transactional perspective, the Self is 'a kind of public square [...] the members of which are in constant conversation'" (Emirbayer 1997, 297; on "Mead and Peirce: Reflexive Self, Language and Sociality" see also Gattamorta 2012). More generally speaking, transactional thought underlies the specific type of relational sociology formulated in Emirbayer's *Manifesto*: this work points out that "transactional thinking, in a word, deconstructs a taken-for-granted moral universe" (1997, 300). Emirbayer's thesis is in keeping with various different theoretical approaches to contemporary sociology developed over the years, including not only pragmatism, but also phenomenology and ethnomethodology. In Emirbayer's *Manifesto*, Mead's name is also associated to that of another important representative of American pragmatism, Dewey, who is mentioned much more frequently in the article in question. When Emirbayer reflects on the ethical aspects of action from the viewpoint of his own theory, which he calls 'relational' and 'transactional', he looks specifically to Dewey for support (on pragmatism and relational methodology, see also Kivinen, Piironen 2018). Emirbayer believes that values ought not to be considered fixed, objective entities existing independently from social players; at the same time, he believes that values cannot be considered a mere subjective construct. This question calls to mind a long-standing debate among sociologists and philosophers (Scheler on the one hand, and Nietzsche on the other, to name just two). According to Emirbayer, "values are by-products of actors' engagement with one another in ambiguous and challenging circumstances, which emerge when individuals experience a discordance between the claims of multiple normative commitments" (1997, 309). Emirbayer cites a passage taken from Mead's work in which the latter discusses the reconstruction of the social world, of the relational fabric encompassing us all, through our interaction with others and through language. In this interaction, social actors transform not only the context but also their vision of the world and their fundamental values. Emirbayer's references to Mead are related to transactional thought (a question that is central to the contemporary debate regarding relational sociology) and to social interaction's capacity to change the values of society (a theme that is key to the debate on symbolic interactionism). However, Mead's specific contribution is not examined in a detailed

manner in the aforesaid essay. Mead cannot therefore be considered a scholar of key importance for the formulation of the *Manifesto*. Emirbayer's sources are to be found elsewhere: it has been claimed that Dewey and Bourdieu could be considered Emirbayer's principal sources of inspiration (Liang, Liu 2018). Emirbayer tends to fall within that category of scholars who attribute a certain creativity to Mead's concept of Self when placed in the surrounding social context. This question is taken up again by Emirbayer (1998) in his essay *What is Agency?* published the year after the *Manifesto*. This essay sees the relational sociologist agreeing with the underlying idea formulated by Joas (1996), according to whom "pragmatist thinkers provide the first steps toward developing an adequate conception of the constitutive creativity of action" (Emirbayer 1998, p. 969). By interweaving the pragmatist worldview and Bergson's theory of time, Mead lays the foundations for a theory of action that goes beyond both utilitarianism and the normative approach.

Relational theory's contributions relating to the work of Mead also include that of Côté (2018), contained in the aforementioned *Handbook* on relational sociology (in regard to this contribution, see Bella, Ferrucci 2022). The basic argument put forward in Côté's essay is immediately and clearly announced, when the author declares that Mead's viewpoint "can best be considered as a 'relational set of relations'", but this "does not connect Mead directly to relational sociology in itself and instead uses 'relational' and 'relations' in a broader (and perhaps looser) sense" (2018, 102). Côté's thoughts set out in this essay relate more to the moral-political sphere than to strictly theoretical concerns. While on the one hand he argues that "the possibility of including Mead in the paradigm of relational sociology has to be considered with caution, at least with respect to the definition of his concepts" (2018, 113), on the other hand he sees Mead as having formulated an original theory not only of Self, but also of society; and it is this second aspect that could be of interest to relational sociology. Côté specifically argues that Mead's outlook can today be of significant importance as a basis for social criticism. He refers to the neo-liberal political-economic culture that first became rooted in Western nations in the early 1980s. This culture, historically based on the *laissez-faire* principle, encouraged and drove criticism of the legitimacy of the welfare state, while promoting free trade on a global scale. The neo-liberal model places the emphasis on the individual and on individualism, and means that it becomes more difficult to see society as something made up of relations transcending individuals. In this context, Mead may be considered to be a progressive thinker who places the questions of equality and education at the center of his socio-political analysis, in an attempt to strengthen the foundations of democracy. In Mead, as in Côté, the relational dimension is connected to symbolic mediation and to the communicative side of social interaction. According to Côté, Mead's ideas can help us perceive the term "relational" in a normative, rather than a founding sense: relational is the opposite of solipsism, atomism and egoism. The implications of relational theory in terms of morality and sociality, is increasingly of interest to sociology scholars (see Hałas, Manterys eds. 2021), and it is interesting to see that they are discussed also in regard to Mead. Côté's revival of the thought of George Herbert Mead is thus significantly different to the analyses of Mead offered by the other scholars considered so far. The latter all ask themselves whether Mead's

“relational” concept of Self is over-socialized, or whether on the contrary there is room within that concept for a certain creativity.

## 2. RELATIONISM OR RELATIONAL AGENCY?

Other two scholars that have made a contribution on the question of Mead’s concept of Self, structure and agency in regard to relational sociologies are Pierpaolo Donati and Nick Crossley. While both of them have given a contribution to the question, they differ in their interpretations of Mead and of the latter’s importance for relational sociology. Compared to that of Emirbayer, Donati’s relational sociology has developed even more independently in relation to Mead. In order to understand the role that Mead is deemed to have played, Donati’s unique view of the very nature of relational sociology should be briefly considered. Donati believes that relational sociology does not represent the mediation of other theoretical proposals: it does not constitute either a synthesis or a supplementing of classical sociological models. More specifically, relational sociology is not a third way, that is, an alternative to paradigms of structure and paradigms of action, and does not represent a relational reinterpretation of these two approaches. In Donati’s view, relational sociology is characterized by an originality based on the fact that it focuses specifically on social relations as its chosen object of analysis and reflection. Within this general framework initially created by Donati (1983; 1991) and then further developed over the course of time (see, for example, Donati 2011; 2021), Mead’s interactional theory initially plays a marginal role. When formulating his relational theory in his early writings, Donati does not dedicate any significant space to Mead. More specifically, when he re-reads the classical sociological models and is concerned with demonstrating the added value of his relational sociology, Donati makes a series of general remarks regarding Mead the symbolic interactionist and he does not consider Mead a benchmark for the development of the relational perspective. In fact, he gives greater importance to other authors, such as Max Weber and Simmel, who specifically focus on the concept of social relations. Donati, however, argues that the latter two scholars cannot be considered to be relational in the strict sense of the term. In particular, he believes that Weber always interprets social relations in the light of social action: a social relation is ultimately always a question of the individual and his/her preferences (in terms of rationality and values) and strategies. Weber’s concept of social action is undoubtedly characterized by certain aspects of creativity, but does not manage to transcend the individual sphere completely. On the other hand, in going beyond Weber’s individualistic premise, Durkheim considers society as a reality *sui generis*. This claim, as such, could be welcomed by the proponents of a relational approach; however, Durkheim’s epistemological holism ends up linking social relations to the power of social structures: the agency dimension vanishes (for a criticism of Durkheim’s epistemology in the light of relational sociological, also see Galán Castro 2019). *Mutatis mutandis*, Donati criticizes the hyper-socialized dimension of Mead’s thinking as well. In the 2000s, Donati proceeds to develop his “autonomous” relational sociology and continues to largely disregard Mead; there were however certain moments when Mead’s ideas were taken into consideration, as

a result of, among other things, Donati's collaboration with Margaret Archer. One important outcome of this collaboration was the publication of a volume on the concept of *Relational Self* in which the two sociologists (Archer and Donati 2015) offered a significant contribution to the study of the aforesaid question, taking as their points of departure relational theory on the one hand, and critical realism on the other. In the introduction to the Italian edition of Archer's book *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, Donati (2008) argues that within Mead's framework insufficient space is afforded to the social actor's individuality, that is, to the independence from society's structure that enables a person to be creative. In Donati's view, certain versions of contemporary relational sociology contain a form of relationism that he believes can be found also in Mead's writings. Relationism is considered a new form of sociologism; a kind of hypertrophy of social relations. One of relational sociology's initial aims was to criticize a theoretical approach that considered individuals detached from their social relations, with such relations being deemed to be essentially of secondary importance. Relationism tends towards the opposite extreme: in other words, individuals are almost lost sight of, with the main focus being placed on those very social relations. In Donati's view, neither *homo oeconomicus* – conceived in the field of economics and having a certain influence also in sociology –, nor *homo sociologicus* are compatible with a relational approach, and they do not appear capable of accounting for the social phenomena arising within the contemporary world. With regard to Mead, Donati shares Archer's argument that Mead's Self is ultimately conditioned and determined by the *Me*; *Alter* and *Ego* interact in a process which in the case of the *Ego* moves from the outside to the inside. Mead's perspective is considered short-sighted by Donati because it is centered on a hyper-socialized idea of the individual (in regard to the concepts of the over-socialized and the under-socialized individual, see also Gronow 2016). According to Donati, the fact that Mead embraces the idea of the "looking-glass Self" means that "the person has little, if any, possibility of transcending the socio-cultural context in which he/she has lived and continues to live. Reflexivity is much more like a mirror reflection than the subject's autonomous consciousness" (2022, 232). Donati thus reiterates his initial belief that Mead perceives individuals as the product of society; or rather, and in order to distinguish Mead's theory from those of the classical holistic sociologists of the nineteenth century, he argues that Mead sees the individual as the product of social. Among the components of the Self, the *Me* is always given priority over the *I*: the *Me* comes first, both in time and in the causal chain (it is the social dimension of a person's identity that generates the individual dimension of the same, and not the other way round). In the sphere of relational sociology, Mead is viewed differently by Roseneil and Ketoviki, who see the *I* that Mead speaks of as "the phase of the Self that enables a person to act beyond habits and social expectations, that enables novelty and creativity" (2016, 147).

A specific reflection is offered by Donati (2022) on the question of the signifying gesture: he dialogues not only with Peirce in particular, but also inevitably with Mead, in regard to this question. The signifying gesture is a fundamental aspect of the ability to communicate; it is of an intentional nature and it presupposes the capacity to put oneself in the other person's shoes and to interpret the meaning that the other attributes to the gesture in question. Mead distinguishes between gestures that are



part of the stimulus-response system, and those he calls signifying gestures. In the latter case, the reflexive, symbolic dimension of gestures is of key importance. For this very reason, it may also appear that signifying gestures underlie the relational dimension of society; but Donati claims that “the theory expounded in *Mind, Self and Society* is effectively a philosophy of the act – not of the relationship – from the point of view of how a social process involves the inter-action of many individuals [...]. Social relationships play a secondary role and are not investigated as such” (2022, 232). Within the pragmatist school of thought, Donati (2022) believes that also Peirce, although tending towards a certain degree of realism, possesses an “insufficient conception of the relationship that mediates reality and knowledge”, and Peirce’s realism risks culminating in “nominalism and constructivism”: “the relationship between the gesture and its deep, full meaning remains hidden beyond the realm of public opinion and behavioural traits [...], the relations of semiosis remain abstract (or virtual) and are constructivist in nature” (2022, 224). Emirbayer (1997, 300-301), on the other hand, thinks that Peircean semiotics theory is “congenial to transactional thinking” when Peirce “agrees on the relational embeddedness of symbols but diverges sharply from the Saussurean tradition in taking as his unit of analysis not dyadic structures but rather a triadic process of ‘sign’, ‘object’, and ‘interpretant’”. Basically then, Donati believes that the influence that behaviourism has had on Mead’s thought is also evident in his theory of the signifying gesture, whereby Mead wavers between the individual act and social interaction, without the question of social relations ever being explicitly mentioned in any detail. The objection concerning the secondary role of social relations can be found in many passages of Donati’s works, and concerns various different scholars and theories. In the specific case of Mead, this objection is important, also because it concerns the broader question of reflexivity and agency.

As previously mentioned, Donati develops his viewpoint also through his interaction with Archer. Archer however interprets differently the contribution that Peirce might offer to critical realism. Archer (2003, 78-90), like Donati, criticizes that Mead’s inner world lacks, in the perspective of the external one, a real autonomy, however she thinks that the contradictions present in Peirce’s initial theory of the Self are only apparent. In his first works, Peirce makes statements like “my language is the sum total of myself” (1931-1958, vol. 5, § 314), or he declares that human consciousness “is more without us than within. It is we that are in it, rather than it in any of us” (1931-1958, vol. 8, § 256); in these statements Peirce seems to deny any autonomy of the Self. In reality, Peirce does not reject human subjectivity but rather Cartesian subjectivism and James’s principle of “absolute insulation”. Archer thinks that the historical phase of the Self (or Me) in Mead could in some way be compared with the “critical Self” in Peirce: the former though, according to Archer, is a socialized deposit, a seat of the inner inclinations matured in the course of life and turned into habits, whereas the latter is a personalized sediment. The dialogue, and in some cases the diatribe, between the I and the critical Self of Peirce begins when the I seeks to convince the critical Self, inclined to routine action, that it is worth undertaking a new course of action different from the habitual one: “When one reasons, it is that critical Self that one is trying to persuade” (Peirce 1931-1958, vol. 5, § 421). According to Colapietro’s interpretation of Peirce quoted by Archer, “language is not simply

something *to* which I conform myself; it is something *by* which I transform myself” (Colapietro 1989: 110; see Peirce MS 290: 58-63). In this sense Peirce argues that the mind is a theatre where “the deliberations that really and sincerely agitate our breasts always assume a dialogic form” (Peirce MS 318: 13d). On this topic, in Depelteau’s *Handbook of Relational Sociology*, also Emily Erikson (2018), while focusing more on other authors and on social network analysis, briefly reflects on Peirce, Mead and their concept of consciousness. Erikson underlines how Peirce and Mead destabilize the notion of a pregiven and enduring monolithic entity that encounters the world: “Following Peirce, reason is produced through experience—which is a direct contradiction to Kant’s position that reason is prior to experience and is necessary as a foundation through which the experience of the world is possible. Mead further developed this line of opposition to Kant by arguing that consciousness, and particularly self-consciousness, is the product of experiencing a social environment (Mead 1934, 186–191)”; Mead in particular “produced an image of the identity and self-consciousness as emergent properties that result from grappling with the complex dynamics of the lived world” (Erikson 2018, 272).

Crossley’s reflections on relational sociology contain certain considerations regarding the role of Mead. More specifically, Crossley (2011) examines the central role played by Mead in resolving selected questions concerning the relationship between structure and agency; this theme is key not only to relational sociology, but also to contemporary social theory in general. Crossley’s underlying argument is that a relational approach is in fact necessary in order to deal with certain unanswered theoretical problems. On the one hand, a social structure may be seen as a network comprising social actors and the relationships connecting them together; on the other hand, individuals become social actors through their interactions. Crossley argues that structure and agency are emerging effects of social relations. In the above-mentioned work, he criticizes the prevailing understanding of social structure insofar as it affords insufficient importance to agency and social relations. The definition proposed by Crossley is that “social structure is an always-evolving network of interaction, interdependence and relations between reflexive social actors who are formed (from biological organisms in the human case) within those relations and interactions. It involves rules (conventions and norms), negotiated within the network, and resources unevenly distributed and exchanged across it” (2022, 167). Analyses of the concept of social structure are based on studies of the question published by the sociologist Anthony King during the first decade of the current millennium. It is important to observe, however, that Mead is another important point of reference for Crossley. In reflecting on the connection between structure and agency, Crossley in fact states that his relational approach avoids the separation of structure from agent “chiefly through appropriation of the work of Mead” (2002, 170). Crossley then specifies why one should look to Mead in order to formulate a relational answer to the problem of the relationship between structure and agency: “His discussion of ‘mind’ and ‘Self’ affords a strong conceptions of agency and his observation that both are formed within social relations and interaction makes that conception relational, embedding actors, irreducibly, within structure” (Crossley 2022, 170).

Mead can help scholars reflect not only (within the micro-sociological sphere) on the construction of personal identity and on the creativity of human agency in relation to social structures, but also (in the macro-sociological sphere) on collective actors. These actors (governments, companies and trade unions, for example) have relationships with one another, and they are also interconnected with the agency of individuals: these relations, taken as a whole, represent a significant part of the social structure. Those relations involving collective actors may be considered second-order relations, and are part of what may be defined as a multi-level configuration. The network of relations linking individuals to one another is a kind of basic structure compared to the configuration of collective actors. Mead contributes fundamentally to an understanding of the role played by significant symbols in the reflexivity of social actors. Language is the most common example of the use of significant symbols, but many other such examples could be given: significant symbols guide many of the social relations we are party to through the operation of a kind of reflexive control. It should also be noted that “Mead makes a further important contribution when he argues that ‘mind’ and ‘Self’ are formed within networks of interaction and relations (i.e. social structure) which they sustain and have the capacity to transform” (Crossley 2022, 176). Social actors organize themselves within, and thanks to, those interactions that give rise to the social structure; however, they do so in a manner that retroactively effects the structure itself. In addition to language, a second key factor in the development of the Self is the assumption of a role. This process clearly regards institutionalized roles, but once again is related to language and to individuals’ inner conversations. In communicating with others, individuals encounter many different points of view, opinions and visions of the world; these elements also become part of the way of seeing things and of relating to the world. There is no mechanical transition from the outside to the inside world; there is no social determinism that develops through language. What there is, though, is a form of interaction that triggers an inner dialogue. On the one hand it is clear that whatever comes from the world outside conditions the individual; it generates expectations, prejudices, expected recognition in that person. At the same time, however, Mead points out that the relational nature of the Self leads agency to shift to the center of the structure.

With regard to this, Crossley also makes reference to Archer’s interpretation of Mead’s thought contained in various of her writings. Crossley and Archer’s points of view differ. Archer appears to underscore the fact that Mead sees the Self as a social construct, she criticizes the “over-socialization” of the internal conversation of the Self; she thinks that the pre-linguistic presence of the Self to his/her own body serves as the grounding of self-consciousness and that, as a consequence, there is something prior to language that remains unattainable by means other than what Archer calls the “sense of the Self” (2015: 95-06). Crossley, on the other hand, argues that while the mind and the Self are created through relations and interactions, they are nevertheless capable of transforming the structure from within. In his reflections on the Self, Crossley criticizes “Cartesian substantialism” according to which the mind and the body (the brain) are two substances: the first being active, the second being material and passive. These two substances are thus considered distinct, and although they are interrelated, they can never be mixed up. It is undeniable that Cartesian theory has had a significant impact, more or less directly and explicitly, on modern

philosophy and on contemporary human sciences. However, this influence has also made it difficult to gain an adequate understanding of inter-subjectivity. If Descartes' theory is taken for granted, an individualistic, atomistic (and thus non-relational) conception of society emerges. Crossley criticizes the Cartesian point of view on various levels. The sociologist in him challenges the idea that the mind is a substance; he asserts that consciousness, insofar as it is intentional, is relational. He argues against the idea that individuals possess an immediate awareness of their minds (in regard to this latter question, Cooley's idea of the "looking-glass Self", if suitably interpreted and reviewed, could make a significant contribution to the debate). Mead's overcoming of Cartesian dualism extensively discussed by Crossley is also discussed in a volume edited by Joas and Huebner in 2016 and entitled *The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead*. This work repeatedly mentions the fact that Mead challenged the Cartesian dualistic separation between mind and body, interiority and social relations, inner speech and external language: "for Mead [...] the description of brain states alone is not a sufficient condition for the explanation of mental phenomena, for they come into existence as a relation and as a relation they need to be explained"; our primary relation to the world is not present to us only as a linguistically organized structure, the linguistic relation to the world is an important but a "second-order, derivative attitude, situated in the mediatory phase of the act" that can be called representation or symbolic mediation (Madzia 2016, 300). In Mead's view, attitudes constitute what might be called "bodily intentionality" in the sense described also by Merleau-Ponty (see, in particular, Crossley 2013 and his discussion of Mead, Merleau-Ponty and embodied communication). According to Crossley, also the ideas of Wittgenstein may be profitably employed for the purposes of a relational sociology: in particular, Wittgenstein's argument against the existence of private language, a question that was also certainly dear to Mead, who insists above all on the internalization of public language while however leaving a margin of creativity to the *I*. Crossley thus believes it possible to formulate an alternative to the Cartesian substantialist model by placing inter-subjectivity at the center of the study of interaction and the social actor. In attempting to do so, Crossley declares that his "main point of reference is the work of G.H. Mead" (2011, 79). Mead's ideas lead Crossley to believe that a relational rethinking of gestural dialogue, significant symbols, and the meaning of conversation, thought as an inner conversation, and the relationship with the generalized other, is entirely possible. Of the relational thinkers taken into consideration, Crossley is the one who lends the greatest importance to Mead, and who acknowledges Mead's significant contribution to, among other things, the development of relational sociologies based on the relationship between the Self and social structures.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

As this chapter has attempted to show, contemporary relational sociologies are beginning to reflect on the importance of a re-reading of the work of George Herbert Mead. However, compared to other classical scholars (Simmel) or contemporary thinkers (Bourdieu), the attention paid to the work and thought of Mead appears

rather limited and non-systematic. This chapter indicates that there are various reasons for this state of affairs: on the one hand, Mead's perspective has been seen as more relationist than relational; on the other hand, the key role played by his transactional perspective has now been recognized, although in this latter case the attention seems to center more on other representatives of American pragmatism (in particular Dewey) than on Mead. The problem of the creativity of action within social relations is the central theme of the revived interest in Mead's work, and of possible further developments within relational sociology. One future contribution that Mead could certainly make to relational sociology is that of his analysis of significant symbols, ranging from significant gestures to verbal symbols. The internal dialogue involves the internalization not only of external verbal language, but of a broader symbolic-cultural system that could be defined as multilingual. This multilingualism includes a multiplicity of intersubjective signs, both verbal and sensorial (visual or acoustic signs, for example). Mead was the first to utilize the "significant symbol" as a privileged conceptual instrument through which to explain the emergence of a reflexive and creative Self (cf. Halas 2002; Helle 2005; Gattamorta 2010, Ch. 3). According to Mead, the very process of receiving and decoding symbolic systems cannot happen just in a mechanical and passive way but through an at least minimal reflexivity of the interpretant Self: "the symbol is thus more than a mere substitute stimulus – more than a mere stimulus for a conditioned response or reflex [...] the response to a symbol does and must involve consciousness" (Mead 1934, 125). Considering that symbolically regulated behaviour of which Mead speaks is an "intentional action", "the use of symbols cannot be reduced to mere behavior" (Habermas 1967, trans. 1988, 65). As also Miller (1973, 148) observes, "Mead makes it abundantly clear that if men could live by habit alone there would be no occasion for thinking". Though leaving to relational sociologies unresolved questions on how a dialogical Self preserves certain irreducible emergent properties, Mead repeatedly stresses the capacity of the I to develop creative solutions of problems of Self-realization: "Under the penalty of stagnation, society cannot but be grateful for the changes which the moral act of the creative 'I' introduces upon the social stage" (Mead 1934, p. xxvi). As shown, relational sociologies have adopted two divergent positions in regard to such aspects. These positions appear, at least for the time being, to be proceeding in two parallel directions. Perhaps a direct comparative analysis beginning with Mead, as certain relational sociologists have started to conduct, could prove beneficial not only for the development of relational sociology, but also for a new, fresh interpretation of certain key aspects of Mead's work.

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